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SUBJECT: SOUTH SERBIA: RHETORIC RISES FOLLOWING ATTACKS BUT SECURITY
SITUATION CALM

REF: BELGRADE 683; BELGRADE 292

Summary

1. (SBU) The situation on the ground in the South Serbian municipalities of Presevo and Bujanovac was calm following July 9 and 14 attacks on police targets in the region. However, local Albanian leaders have voiced strong objections to what they describe as heavy-handed police actions in the aftermath of the attacks and have accused the central government of reverting to the tactics of Serbia's repressive past. The investigation into the attacks has yet to produce any hard evidence concerning the perpetrators and their motives, and the police have failed to consult with EULEX, despite public pronouncements that the international community shares part of the burden for the security situation along the Kosovo border. Although the government has softened its rhetoric and extended a hand to representatives of the South Serbia Albanians, its refusal to coordinate with the local governments likely has damaged already frayed relations. End Summary.

Attacks Put Region on Edge, Inflammate Passions

2. (SBU) According to Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) contacts in South Serbia, the security situation in the region was calm but strained following July 9 and 14 grenade and explosive attacks on police targets in Lucane and Presevo (Ref A). No further attacks or incidents have been reported. As of July 21, there did not appear to be an increased police or security presence in the Presevo or Bujanovac municipalities.

3. (U) Ethnic Albanian local government officials and Riza Halimi, the Albanian MP in the Serbian Parliament, quickly denounced the violence and called for efforts to identify the perpetrators. This constructive approach gradually gave way to frustration as the central government largely ignored its South Serbia Albanian counterparts. Interior Minister Ivica Dacic made two trips to the region but failed to meet with the leadership of Bujanovac and Presevo. President Tadic, who travelled to the Ground Safety Zone (GSZ) on July 10 to declare a vigorous response to such acts of terrorism, stated that the leaders of Presevo and Bujanovac needed to assume partial responsibility for the situation but did not talk with them before returning to Belgrade.

4. (SBU) This sense of frustration grew into outrage following reports that security forces who searched houses in Presevo and the villages of Gerajt, Norca, Miratovac, and Koncul from July 14-16 engaged in heavy-handed tactics reminiscent of past eras. Our interlocutors and eyewitnesses who spoke with the OSCE alleged that the searches were carried out in an intimidating fashion with an excessive number of troops and weaponry; for example, the search in

Koncul reportedly started at 4:15 am on July 15 and involved masked special forces, armored vehicles, and a tank. According to a letter to the Embassy from the Mayor and Municipal President of Bujanovac, during the search a two-year old boy was separated from his parents and put in a room by himself for more than three hours. In a July 18 press statement, Minister Dacic denied allegations that the police or security forces were engaged in abuses or indiscriminate actions and insisted that the only searches conducted were in connection with criminal investigations.

Local Governments React

15. (U) In their July 16 letter to the Embassy, the OSCE, and the British, French, and German Embassies, Bujanovac Mayor Shaip Kamberi and Assembly President Jonuz Musliu harshly criticized the government response to the attacks. The letter accused the central government, and specifically Minister Dacic, of creating an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and insecurity for every citizen of the municipality through "spectacular actions and untactful statements." The two leaders also alleged that the government was attempting to create a pretext for eliminating the GSZ (a product of the 1999 Kumanovo Agreement ending the Kosovo conflict) and introducing a state of emergency. The letter concluded by stating that if the government continued its policy of police repression, the South Serbia Albanians would be forced to reconsider their participation in the Coordinating Body for South Serbia (Ref B) because they could not cooperate with a government that terrorized its own citizens.

16. (U) On July 17, the municipal assembly in Presevo also reacted,

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adopting a resolution calling for the government to withdraw the Gendarmerie from the GSZ (which Minister Dacic dismissed outright until security risks abate) and for an investigation into allegations of excessive use of force during the aftermath of the attacks. Mayor Ragmi Mustafa, a hard-liner who in the past advocated for the Presevo Valley joining Kosovo, further inflamed the situation by stating that "the police acted the same way in Kosovo, and we know what happened there. Serbia lost Kosovo. Is it, in this way, also pushing the Presevo Valley towards Kosovo?" Mustafa also complained that the only communication with the central government was through the press.

Investigation Ongoing, Dacic Reaches Out

17. (SBU) Interior Ministry Director of Police Milorad Veljovic announced on July 19 that the investigation into the attacks in Lucane and Presevo continued and that the police had "certain information about the possible perpetrators, as well as about the existence of terrorist groups in this area." (Veljovic also claimed to have videotapes implicating Kosovo Police Service members in the smuggling of materiel used in the attacks; those allegations have not yet been substantiated.) Despite public statements by President Tadic and Minister Dacic that EULEX and KFOR should play a role in the investigation and in securing the border with Kosovo, our EULEX sources in Belgrade continued to indicate that EULEX had not received any specific request for assistance or information pertaining to the investigation from the Interior Ministry. On July 21, EULEX officials in Belgrade approached the Interior Ministry, asking directly about cooperation, but were told that the Ministry could not share information at this time because it was with prosecutors. EULEX in response stressed its willingness to cooperate.

18. (U) In a welcome development, Interior Minister Dacic reached out through the media to Mayors Kamberi and Mustafa on July 20, inviting the heads of Bujanovac and Presevo to cooperate in the battle against crime and terrorism in South Serbia. Dacic, who also serves as First Deputy Prime Minister, added that he was prepared to use his position in the government to help establish a political dialogue with the Albanian community even on those issues which were not within the competence of his ministry. He also announced that all information on two recent attacks would be shared with representatives of the municipalities.

Comment

19. (SBU) Although there have been no further attacks in South Serbia in a week, the fallout threatens to have a negative effect on efforts to integrate local Albanians into the Serbian state. There is plenty of blame to be apportioned, including to the government for its failure to communicate with local authorities and address allegations that its response was heavy-handed, and to the local governments for their unhelpful and populist rhetoric. These developments undermine already fragile confidence in a region less than ten years removed from armed conflict. As such, there is an urgent need for direct, unfiltered contact between representatives of the central government and local leaders as the only means to overcome this crisis. End Comment.

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